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IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME AND SPACE¹

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¹ “[...] Marcel Proust is not only in search of lost time but also in search of lost space.” POULET, 1992.

ABSTRACT

Celebrating the centenary of the publication of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, it is proposed a reading of some connections between this classic of literature and the architectural thought in the way of teaching architecture, as adopted by FAUUSP. The importance of Proust's stylistic innovation is seen through the influence of Brazilian architectural thought, when the role of this art is accepted as language of the world around us. The overlapping of time and space allows the mixture of the quest for reminiscence with the search for spaces of fruition in modern architecture.

KEYWORDS

Time. Space. Architecture. Literature. Proust, Marcel (1871-1922). Artigas, João Batista Vilanova (1915-1985).

EN BUSCA DEL TIEMPO Y DE LOS ESPACIOS PERDIDOS

RESUMEN

Celebrando los 100 años de la publicación de “En busca del tiempo perdido”, de Marcel Proust, se hace una lectura de algunas relaciones entre este clásico de la literatura mundial y el pensamiento arquitectónico, a la luz de la práctica enseñada en la Facultad de Arquitectura y Urbanismo de la Universidad de São Paulo (FAUUSP). La importancia de las innovaciones estilísticas de Proust se ven aquí por sus reflejos en el pensamiento de la arquitectura brasileña, al aceptarse el papel de esa arte como lenguaje del mundo a nuestro alrededor. La imbricación de tiempo y espacio permite la transposición de la busca de la reminiscencia a la procura de espacios de disfrute de la Arquitectura moderna.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Tiempo. Espacio. Arquitectura. Literatura. Proust, Marcel (1871-1922). Artigas, João Batista Vilanova (1915-1985).

EM BUSCA DO TEMPO E DOS ESPAÇOS PERDIDOS

RESUMO

Celebrando os 100 anos da publicação de *Em busca do tempo perdido*, de Marcel Proust, é feita uma leitura de algumas relações entre esse clássico da literatura mundial e o pensamento arquitetônico, à luz da prática que se ensina na FAUUSP. A importância das inovações estilísticas de Proust é vista por reflexos no pensamento da Arquitetura brasileira, ao aceitar-se o papel dessa arte como linguagem do mundo que nos cerca. A imbricação de tempo e espaço permite a transposição da busca da reminiscência para a procura dos espaços de fruição da Arquitetura moderna.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

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As many Proust fanatics, I once went on a pilgrimage to Illiers-Combray. I saw the square of the village, Aunt Léonie's House, I entered the bedroom where little Marcel used to anxiously wait for his mother's kiss. Through the window, I sighted the little gate where visitors would arrive, and beyond the fence, 'Swann's side'. Then later, at the square café, I ordered a linden tea and the extraordinary madeleine. The experience was disappointing. The village's church is a church like any other; Aunt Léonie's House looks exactly like many others in the province, 'Swann's side' is just a muddy terrain, and the madeleine, a dry and dull sponge cake. There was nothing on the bottom of my linden cup of tea. Everything was there, except the amazement of Proust's text.²

One-hundred-year interval separates us from the publication of the first volume of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (14 November 1913). Among architects, the date went almost unnoticed, despite much room is dedicated to Architecture in the book. In the first volume, entitled *In Swann's Way*, brilliantly translated into Brazilian Portuguese by poet Mario Quintana, the narrator strolls round the imaginary city of Combray where he finds the outstanding Gothic church of Saint Hillaire, then he follows John Ruskin's routes, who was the intellectual mentor of both Proust and the *Arts and Crafts* movement headed by William Morris.

Gothic, that for many³ was the style of decadent aristocracy, meant the incorporation of sensorial world into the fine arts universe. While the neoclassical style represented the expression of the rising bourgeoisie and therefore considered progressive, the Gothic was linked to the construction of churches and, was deemed reactionary. To Ruskin, as well as to Proust, Gothic was the expression of French art, and added handwork – the handicraft – to the technical resources of authentic materials; structural boldness, and the corroboration of the different arts leading up to the ecstatic fruition of the built space. Similarly to the Gothic style, Proust's text is a multitude of overlapping images, in W. Benjamin's words, "the Nile of language" (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 201).

In Gothic architecture, each rock carries the mark of its making, each corner sustains the charm of a revered treatment, each beam of light both hides and reveals mysteries. In Proust, the artistic experience was not a mere *cosa mentale*, but brought with it traces of the spiritual and the sensitive; and the cathedral he writes about holds, in each of its words, the art, the refinement, and the profusion of senses of the Venice's stones. Again according to Benjamin, Proust's book is an "[...] unconstruable synthesis in which the absorption of a mystic, the art of a prose writer, the verve of a satirist, the erudition of a scholar, and the self-consciousness of a monomaniac have combined in an autobiographical work". (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 201). It is worth keeping in mind that Gothic architecture also intended to unite, in its spaces, the glory of God, the house for men, bourgeoisie works, the tomb of fees, stones of the neglected, and mysteries of darkness. It gathers divine *lux* in its interior, the *lumen* of reflections through stained-glass windows, and the *splendor* of things whose souls shine under God's light.

Proust weaves facts experienced by him into his texts, an exercise of memories and lapses, but the warp of reminiscences never turns out dense; it is fluid and subjected to the misalignments of forgetfulness. André Gide, while publisher at Gallimard, refused to publish it; and later, confessed this to be his greatest mistake of life. In Brazil, brilliant names of our literature, such as

² PERRONE-MOISÉS, *Espaços proustianos*, p. 70, our translation.

³ Besides those affiliated with the Arts and Crafts movement, of Marxist inclinations, considerable number of conservatives opposed Classicism, attributing to France its medieval origin, therefor Gothic.

Carlos Drummond de Andrade and Manuel Bandeira translated or commented on it; as have done prominent recent scholars, such as Jeanne Marie Gagnebin and Olgária Matos. The book does not report the adventures remembered by the author per se, but the sheer act of remembrance, which will be dissolved in forgetfulness by the nights. Situated in the borderline between sleep and wakefulness, fragmented in nonsensical images where diffuse rays of light pass through stained-glass windows, or, yet, amidst the subtle signs conveyed by the words.

Wandering the roads of his childhood in Combray, the young narrator writes about two courses he used to take on his walks: one longer, near the castle of the nobles of Guermantes; and a shorter one, by the house of the Jew, lover of a young courtesan. On this path, he roams through the fields of memory, of art critique, of narrative, of novel. He often comments on the beauty of an imaginary Gothic cathedral. He starts by describing its beauty and elegance, as well as his astonishment before its ogives and stained-glass windows; the images come to him unintentionally, charged with strong sensation. An apparently incoherent Proust composes a succession of viewpoints, as if surrounding the emotions and adding complex visions to them, which overlap in order to form the body of the narrative.

⁴ Comment from W. Benjamin, *op. cit.*

To the character-narrator, the impressionist paintings of Elstir and Jan Vermeer's landscape of Delft are the most attractive to him: the dense yellow that the Flemish painter lends to the shaded city wall reports to the world more about what is hidden than what the object reveals. The figures composed by the author are formed by fragments of events, impressions, and flashes, expressing reality metaphorically, bringing into the painter's universe a meager, yet strongly sensorial, contact with the world, full of internal relations that seem to mimic society in which he lives. The literary images formed seem like those of Cubist paintings by Braque, Picabia, or Picasso, who has given rise to a new vision of art, six years earlier, with *Demoiselles d'Avignon*.

Proust's social situation reflects an ambiguity between his aristocratic life and the innovative stance of modern art revolutionaries. Ambiguity which is, at the same time, his secret and his genius; the search, deep in the soul, for what is alive, is the task of all those who were committed, in Europe, around the turn of the 20th century, to building new dimensions in art and knowledge. What matters is not what the walls of Delft demarcate, but what there is of life behind them⁴. The distinct lives of Proust's characters, and the different dimensions they assume throughout his books reveal a world with no fixed truths, no Manichaeism, no fixed points of view; insofar as each step of the history develops, the narrator changes or adds to his views of his characters and of himself, which makes evident that the outlook on each experience varies according to the moment in which it is retrieved. He discovers, in art, the only possible way of existence, an existence which disperses itself in time, but which, in *time regained* in reminiscence, will, eventually, rebuild its meaning.

The word *time* is on the title of the book, and it is also its last word. Along-th its seven volumes (in the Brazilian version), we can see the first experiences of human existence, creating imaginary places, names and events, as well as an imaginary time, time-image that changes inasmuch as it is activated by involuntary memory, and colored by current emotions. The essence of time is the fleeting present, whose strength is easily lost to a past no longer experienced, but only an image of what had happened. Therefore time will

only be *time* if reconstructed by imagination, names, and figures of the present, reaching back to the past. To search for the essence of time cannot abstain from the search for space, because both are hopelessly mingled. This is why Balbec's beaches are crossed by bicycles of the *young girls in flower*, and its breeze will give him the sensibility to discover beauty, not the beauty in Albertine or Andrée, but in anyone of them, who could then become indifferently Marcel's lover, because it won't be the characters, but time and space that crossing the beach will enchant and take him to meet, not only love, but also Elstir, the painter who introduces him to the girls, that is the possibility of love. Creation of time and space becomes then the essence of a life which longs to be meaningful and complete; art alone can bring about this feat and only the search for essences will enable him to research the intricacies of life throughout time.

Scholarly readers who are really familiarized with Proust's words can find, in each segment of the book, bricks that build the cathedrals of reminiscence created by Proust. We, who only know about places and emotions, and can hardly know how to fit time in our designed towers, we get lost in face of the beautiful and touching literary images of the book, which open our souls to an unknown space-time. The recollection of the facts of our lives, by memory, the assembly of images of places we have been, mornings in which we have woken up or places we have visited, contribute to bring us to a new place, which we search without being able to rediscover, that can only be invented.

Thus, even though this symphony of life's images is not restricted to inner images but pictures the possibility of building a time and a space that never existed before, that will no longer be what they once were, and that will be a future construction, allowing us to restore meaning to every image we have collected and that have gotten lost in the dark places of memory where they once have been stored. A place is not just a place, but a vast universe, where countless projects can fit, as well as infinite possibilities of adapting human geometry to the same form.

An hour is not merely an hour, it is a vase full of scents and sounds and projects and climates, and what we call reality is a certain connexion between these immediate sensations and the memories which envelope us simultaneously with them – a connexion that is suppressed in a simple cinematographic vision, which just because it professes to confine itself to the truth in fact departs widely from it – a unique connexion which the writer has to rediscover in order to link forever in his phrase the two sets of phenomena which reality joins together. (In *Search of Lost Time*, Volume VI: *Time Regained*, p. 289)

For us, architects, the challenge of drawing this “vase full of scents and sounds and designs and climates” motivates us to create the design: without it, there is no Architecture, but, at the same time, we find us constrained by the limits of the design. Just as the author puts himself to write after experiencing the erotic pleasure caused by Bergotte's phrases and the joy when describing Martinville's bell towers; similarly, what leads the architect to carry on his work of design is a combination of erotic pleasure brought about by his interference in a space with the joy of contemplating imaginary palaces. However, we are also faced with impossibilities: that of Architecture, as transformer of the world and articulator of behaviors, and even the impossibility of solving, with design, all the problems presented. Roland Barthes notes three factors that make it impossible for the main character of the novel to become a writer:

It is Norpois that first conveys to the young narrator a discouraging, ridiculous image of literature, but that he, however, would not even have enough talent to execute; much later, a second image will depress him even more: the discovery of a passage of the prestigious, yet derisory, Goncourt's Journal which confirms, by comparison, his impotence to transform sensation into notation; finally, and even more serious, since addressed to his own sensibility and no longer to his talent, a final incident comes to definitely dissuade him from writing: spotting, from a train that takes him back to Paris after a long disease, three trees in the middle of a field, the narrator can only feel indifference before beauty; he concludes he will never be able to write again; sadly released from all obligation to a commitment he recognizes himself definitely unable to keep; he agrees to go back to the frivolity of the world and goes to a reception in the afternoon at the house of the duchess of Guermantes. It is then that, by a truly dramatic transposition, having reached the depths of renounce, the narrator will find, right at his reach, the power of writing. (BARTHES, 1974, p. 55-56) Our translation

The abandonment of writing is similar to the abandonment architects had to face when the doors to modernity have opened: giving up unnecessary adornments, abandoning orders, styles, leaving behind the primacy of geometry, and embracing incertitude.

In this year (2015), we also celebrate the 100th anniversary of architect Vilanova Artigas. Just like the writer, the professor produced, in his emblematic design project – the building of the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of the University of São Paulo (FAU) – what Gilles Deleuze attributes to Proust's work: a profusion of signs. *Salão Caramelo* (the central area of the building) is a square towards which slabs uniformed by right angles lean irregularly; orthogonal forms fighting the oblique force of the ramps; beams of sunlight, times controlled, times uncontrolled, bathe the place blurring the limits between inner and outer spaces, as the rules of environmental comfort are blurred in favor of art. Much was said about the flaws of the building, regarding its temperature, air circulation and insulation; nonetheless, Professor Flavio Mota has pointed that the great quests of Architecture can subvert the demands of daily life. If that is true or not, the fact is that the issue of the environmental comfort of FAU's building was never really an easy one to solve for the architect. The discomfort brought about by temperature-related issues reflects the ambiguity that dominates this work. Also for Proust, comfort doesn't seem to be a problem, for the thousands pages filled with futile details which apparently add nothing to the plot, but when in fact, the details *are* the plot itself. In literature, as well as in architecture, the gods dwell in the details.

Ambiguity is Proust's texts very substance, explicit in Sodom and Gomorrah's sexuality, in the exquisite writing that, instead of complementing the classic, initiates the modern. The abundance of details that, instead of entangling the text, brings about detachment from the material world, in order to enter the spiritual realm, where real places mix with imaginary ones, and historical characters (such as Dreyfus) interact with fictional. In FAU's Architecture, ambiguity is reflected in the central square, towards which everything converges and that opens itself to the garden, making the most private space also the most public.

As for Katinsky's interest (KATINSKY, 2003), Artigas, as well as many other architects of his generation, abandons Architecture when, in 1956, disappointed with what was happening in the USSR, designs the Berquó's

house, or the Morumbi Stadium, expressing his disbelief regarding the creational act, and turning towards a new proposition of language. His proposals become more provocative, he broadens the universe of architectural language with innovative elements such as FAU's mushroom ceiling, to be used in many further design-projects, both by Paulo Mendes da Rocha (Pinacoteca of São Paulo), and Koolhaas (Library of Seattle), or in Siza and Souto de Moura's project of the Serpentine Gallery Pavilion.

He creates frames and partitions, brings back the issue of water pipelines, among many other innovations that end up by overshadowing controversies about environmental comfort. To Architecture, abandonment lies in dismissing joyful forms, the possibilities of the signifying of forms, the attempt to regulate the use of spaces. It means dedicating oneself to discuss its own impossibilities and, with that, to abandon the world in order to become language. Modern Architecture gives up dialog with comfort, compliance to the program, the monumentality of place, to become a diffusor of signs whose meanings are not exhausted in a reading, or fixed to a template, but which are constantly being recreated. Architecture, as literature, ceases to register an instant or a sensation, in order to become reminiscences, "[...] which are metaphors of life, and the metaphors are reminiscences of art" (DELEUZE, 2000, p. 55).

"Through art alone are we able to emerge from ourselves, to know what another person sees of a universe which is not the same as our own and of which, without art, the landscapes would remain as unknown to us as those that may exist on the moon. Thanks to art, instead of seeing one world only, our own, we see that world multiply itself and we have at our disposal as many worlds as there are original artists, differing more widely from each other than those which roll round the infinite. (PROUST, *Time Regained*, p.116)

Instead of one comfortable or appropriate school, new forms in which not only the previously existing school fit in, but also the many different schools into which FAU has transformed itself over the past forty years. There, new forms, which were never nor comfortable nor accommodated, fit in, continuing to produce signs toward which we lean, like imperfect volumes over an immanent cloak, open to receive new ideas and concepts from its spaces.

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